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ABSTRACT

The Research Institute on Secondary Education Reform for Youth with Disabilities (RISER) has been studying three significantly restructured high schools that have included students with disabilities and their parents in the design and/or implementation of school reform efforts. Each of these schools has operated for 3-12 years with its new, whole-school reform design and ranges in size from 400 to 1,000 students. This brief reports results from a survey of educators, counselors, and administrators in the three schools that examined which post-school outcomes are most important to educators, the extent to which educator's expectations for post-school outcomes differ for students with disabilities, and how this information can be used to provide accountability for the school and to improve teaching and learning experiences for students. Results indicate that of the 50 possible post-school outcomes on the survey, 7 emerged as equally important for students with and without disabilities, including success in both college and career choices, college admission and completion, type of employment, job satisfaction, and not working/not in school. The respondents' comments regarding the current and potential uses of post-school information reflected an emphasis on uses that would directly benefit teaching, curriculum, new or improved policies, and future students. (CR)

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No. 4

**Research Institute on Secondary Education Reform**
***for Youth with Disabilities***

**Brief**

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# Life After High School: Which Postschool Outcomes Matter for Students With and Without Disabilities in Restructured High Schools?

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The focus and quality of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices in U. S. high schools continue to be challenged by business and government leaders, university admissions officers, and parents (*"Reality Check 2000,"* 2000). In response to the widespread interest in higher levels of student achievement, governors, state legislators, and others have called for new academic learning standards and assessments to ensure that students leave high school ready to enter college or the new information and learning-intensive economy. Since the early 1990s, many high schools have adopted new strategies for teaching and learning designed to provide students with challenging and cross-disciplinary curricula as well as engaging learning opportunities that enable them to see how knowledge is used and developed in adult life. In some communities, these reform strategies have resulted in new charter schools or theme-focused magnet schools. In other communities, the focus is on significantly restructuring comprehensive high schools to create small learning communities, portfolio graduation requirements, personal learning plans for all students, or community service and workplace learning opportunities for all students.

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## INSTITUTE MISSION

The mission of the institute is to expand the current knowledge base related to practices and policies in secondary schools that enhance learning, achievement, and postschool outcomes for students with disabilities.

## CORE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are critical features of instruction, assessment, and support strategies that promote authentic understanding, and achievement (and performance) for all students?

2. How have changes in authentic inclusive learning and schooling practices affected the school and postschool outcomes (and their interaction) for students with disabilities (collectively and disaggregated) using frames of reference focused on equity, value added, and accountability?

3. How do schools accommodate district and state outcome assessments, and how do such accommodations affect the participation in, reporting of, and validity of assessment?

4. In schools evolving toward authentic and inclusive instruction, what are the roles and expectations of stakeholders as they engage in planning for secondary and postsecondary experiences?

5. What contextual factors are required to support and sustain the development of secondary-level learning environments that promote authentic understanding, achievement, and performances for all students?

6. What strategies are effective in providing both information and support to policymakers, school administrators, teachers, human service personnel, and the community so they utilize the findings to create and support learning environments that promote authentic understanding, achievement, and performance for all students?

All students, especially students with disabilities, have much to gain or lose in the evolving milieu of education reforms. Many of the school reform movements promise improved postschool outcomes for students and society, such as a world class workforce, improved access to and success in postsecondary education, or reduced dropout rates for poor and minority students. However, there appears to be little or no relationship between many of these education reform efforts and increased economic productivity (Levin, 1998) or substantial gains in postsecondary educational attainment. While substantial evidence is available documenting the relationship between increased educational attainment and higher earnings, the link is less clear between school reforms and certain types of postsecondary education and earnings or employment stability in the new information and learning-intensive economy.

Following more than a decade of education reform, the attention of policymakers and educators is turning to two central questions: (a) How effective are the various reform-focused, school-based practices in improving student learning? and (b) What results have been produced from these reforms?

Over the past two years the Research Institute on Secondary Education Reform for Youth with Disabilities (RISER) has been studying three significantly restructured high schools that have included students with disabilities and their parents in the design and/or implementation of school reform efforts. Since each of these schools has been operating for 3–12 years with its new, whole-school reform design, several important questions can be addressed regarding postschool outcomes. In this research brief, we examine three questions:

1. Which postschool outcomes realized by graduates are most important to educators?
2. To what extent do educators' expectations for postschool outcomes differ for students with and without disabilities?
3. How can this information be used to provide accountability for the school and to improve teaching and learning experiences for students?

## The Restructured and Inclusive High Schools

The three RISER study schools range in size from 400 to 1,000 students in grades 9–12 or 7–12. They are located in a major urban setting and in smaller communities in the northeast. Students with a range of disabilities represent 16%–22% of the student population in these schools, compared with 14% in the typical U.S. high school (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). These schools operate in a changing multicultural context that reflects demographic trends similar to those found in nearby communities. None of these public high schools uses selective admissions standards. While local school leaders can provide confirmable estimates of the percentage of graduates attending college and seeking careers directly following high school, recent follow-up reports or studies are not available.

School One, located in a large, metropolitan city, offers a community service and internship program through which students are prepared for work, citizenship, and higher education. Courses feature the integration of math, science, humanities, and English. During the last 2 years, all students have been required to complete a series of portfolios, which determines their eligibility for meeting school-defined graduation standards. Admission to a 4-year college is the expected outcome for each student, and each student is provided with an advisor.

School Two, located in a small capital city, provides all students with individualized learning plans that are reviewed formally by parents, educators, and students two or three times each year. The individualized learning plans help students reflect on and connect their experiences in school to their future life and career goals. These plans also engage students in personally relevant, challenging, motivating, and accountable educational activities. Students have a wide range of community-based learning and independent study options.

At School Three, a suburban school, all students complete a 40-hour community service requirement. Their high school experience includes a series of

portfolio projects: a 10th-grade exhibition project, an 11th-grade post-graduation portfolio (an individualized postsecondary plan), and an extensive 12th-grade senior project that requires students to demonstrate their understanding and/or skill level in a specific area. In this school, student success is linked closely to personal growth and community involvement, as well as to traditional academic achievement standards.

## The Survey

For this study, a survey was developed and mailed to 155 teachers, counselors, and administrators at the three schools in February 2000. The six-page instrument gathered their assessment of the importance of 50 different postschool outcomes for students with and without disabilities using a three-point scale: very important, important, and not important. Their responses to the following open-ended question were also sought: In what ways would postschool outcome data on students be useful to you in your classroom and high school setting? Across the three schools, an 84.5% response rate was achieved. This high response rate provides a high degree of confidence in the findings at these three restructured high schools, which have carefully and systematically included students with disabilities over the past several years.

While parents are key partners in the educational process for students with disabilities, they were not included in this study. At these high schools, parents have been an active part of the school design and development process, and they participate in students' individualized education program (IEP) conferences at which postschool outcomes are considered and discussed.

## Critical Postschool Outcomes

Of the 50 possible postschool outcomes on the survey, 7 emerged as equally important for students with and without disabilities. As suggested in Table 1, when the outcomes deemed "most important" by more than 90% of the respondents are identified, success in both college and career choices is the overriding expectation for all students graduating from restructured and

Table 1. Highest Rated Postschool Outcome Information

| | *Percent of Respondents* | |
|---|---|---|
| Most Important Outcomes | Students without disabilities | Students with disabilities |
| Type of postsecondary institution attended | 96.2 | 97.7 |
| College completion status | 93.2 | 96.9 |
| Type of employment | 93.1 | 93.9 |
| Level of job satisfaction | 92.4 | 94.7 |
| Type of postsecondary program | 92.4 | 94.6 |
| Not working/not in school | 91.6 | 93.9 |
| Job match to student interests | 91.6 | 93.9 |
| Working and going to school | 89.3 | 93.3 |
| Job advancement following initial placement | 88.5 | 90.1 |
| Self-determination/advocacy in daily activities | 82.4 | 92.4 |
| Financial management skills | 80.1 | 90.1 |

inclusive high schools. Three of the most important outcomes focused on college admission and completion, while three others pertained to the type of employment and level of job satisfaction obtained by students following graduation. One of the highest rated outcomes was "Not working/not in school," which confirms the clear intent of school restructuring efforts to address both college and career outcomes. There is a clear and consistent consensus among 90% of the educators in these schools that both students with and students without disabilities are expected to enter and succeed in postsecondary education and the labor market.

Beyond the common focus on college and career outcomes, several additional outcomes were rated highly (90% or greater) for students with disabilities. These outcomes emphasized the problems of underemployment and family dependency that have plagued students with disabilities for decades. Respondents rated "Self-determination/advocacy" and "Financial management skills" as significantly more important for these graduates or school leavers. In these schools, where approximately 16% of the students have disabilities, these outcomes are viewed as particularly important. It should be noted that these two outcomes are also seen as relatively important for students without disabilities (by 82% and 80% of the respondents, respectively). In the curricular and instructional approaches used at each of the schools, student-led individual planning meetings, the development of individual career and learning plans, and the use of graduation portfolios ensure a focus on managing one's life independently following high school.

These "most important" outcomes describe several key pieces of data and postschool information that are useful in examining policies and practices. With regard to postschool employment indicators, educators' interests have moved beyond employment status data in search of evidence regarding the occupational match with graduates' interests, the level of job satisfaction, and job advancement opportunities. In an era marked by a productive economy with increased mobility by employees among firms, educators consider job satisfaction and advancement opportunities important indicators of successful transitions to work. Interest in these data clearly suggests that additional evidence is needed beyond the percentage of graduates employed and their annual earnings.

With regard to postschool education indicators, educators are interested in the type of postsecondary institutions and programs that graduates select, as well as their college completion status. Other information considered useful (but to a lesser extent) included grade point average, major field of study, and college admission test scores. Along with their interest in achieving high rates of college attendance by graduates from these schools, educators have a strong interest in having more information systematically compiled about the successes and challenges that graduates encounter in college. While these detailed data are seen as important, these high schools rely on the conventional information that most high schools receive from colleges and the college admission testing companies, as well as informal information exchanges (e.g., alumni visits, reunions).

## Using Postschool Outcome Information

As noted in Table 2, six major themes emerged from the responses provided by educators to the question: In what ways would postschool outcome data on students be useful to you in your classroom and high school setting?

The respondents' comments regarding the current and potential uses of postschool information reflected an emphasis on uses that would directly benefit teaching, curriculum, new or improved policies, and future students. For teachers who offer project-focused or community-based learning experiences, it is important to understand how these experiences are actually used by graduates following high school. With regard to curriculum changes, the recent efforts that restructured schools have made (e.g., to align with state standards, to implement student advisories and block schedules, or to integrate career and academic courses) all appear promising. However, respondents' comments suggest that educators are looking for postschool information from graduates that would help them to make informed

Table 2. Major Themes of and Uses for Postschool Outcome Information

- Informing current instructional practices
- Encouraging curriculum development and change
- Improving student preparation and learning for the "real world"
- Initiating changes in schoolwide policies and practices
- Changing faculty and staff expectations and attitudes
- Measuring general reform effectiveness

changes, for example, in areas that appear weak in the curriculum.

Since these restructured schools offer innovative alternatives designed 5–10 years ago to address some of challenges confronted by urban, small, and/or poor communities, educators are interested in knowing a lot about how graduates are faring from a policy perspective. Additionally, the educators in these schools appear to use some postschool outcome information in their teaching to inform students about learning in the real world. However, as a number of comments suggest, they are interested in having much more information about what graduates regard as the most valuable learning and assessment experiences. While student portfolios, service learning projects, and internships are commonplace in these restructured schools, how these experiences or learning products benefit students in making the transition to another phase of life is essentially unknown.

## Conclusions

In selected restructured and inclusive high schools, this study found substantial interest in using postschool outcome information to answer a number of key questions about the quality and impact of the learning experiences provided to students. This information is critical in judging the changes or refinements needed in major components of the school-based reforms, such as personalized learning plans, portfolio assessment systems, and community service learning requirements. According to the broad spectrum of educators surveyed in this study, information from alumni about the usefulness of these restructuring and inclusion initiatives would be quite beneficial. Unfortunately, little, if any, information is presently available about the post-high school education, career, and living status of graduates, or from graduate follow-up studies in these settings. As is the case with many school reform efforts, these restructured high schools have made considerable investments in curriculum and professional development over the past decade but have given limited attention to building a capacity and system for improving these ventures using postschool outcome data from or about graduates. Overall, these data indicate that in high schools with well-established reforms, faculty members are very interested in creating postschool outcome and accountability systems, but have not yet done so.

There is a surprisingly high level of agreement on the importance of approximately 25 indicators for assessing the educational benefits realized by students with and without disabilities. Eleven of the most important indicators are identified in Table 1. These high priority postschool outcome indicators can serve as a primary guide for designing postschool indicators for restructured, inclusive high schools.

## Next Steps

Following upon this documented and focused interest in postschool outcomes data, leaders and educators in restructured, inclusive high schools should begin to build information systems that are appropriate and useful. This will entail:

1. Working closely with state education, labor, and human service agencies, as well as 2- and 4-year colleges, to determine how information in these systems can be summarized and reported on a recurring basis. It would be most helpful to obtain annual reports for individual schools that describe administrative data on college admissions and placement testing, academic progress, support services and accommodations received, and eligibility for and use of rehabilitation and other human services provided by state agencies, employment, and earnings.

2. Developing and experimenting with online follow-up surveys, alumni e-mail network groups, and other electronic approaches to obtaining the postschool outcome data directly from graduates and school leavers.

3. Reviewing and using follow-up instruments, procedures, and information systems that have been developed over the past decade in secondary special education projects. For example, the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) for Youth with Disabilities provides an excellent framework for examining postschool outcomes and their relationship to program practices and community characteristics, as well as surveys and interview guides for use with students, graduates, parents, employers, and others. See: http://www.sri.com/nlts2/

4. Involving school-based leadership teams in professional development activities to create new systems for data-based planning or decision making with a particular emphasis on collecting and using postschool indicators data.

5. Studying the efforts of major school reform networks focused on using student assessment and program evaluation information to guide their planning (e.g., the Annenberg Institute for School Reform; High Schools That Work; other school reform models approved by the U.S. Department of Education's Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program).

6. Initiating case studies of restructured and/or inclusive high schools that have used postschool indicators in their accountability and continuous improvement systems. These case studies would be helpful in determining the impact of postschool indicator data on instructional improvements and student learning opportunities.

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